

“Diplomatic Memories” of Alka Nestoroff

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Araştırmacı

Letters are always written because of absence and are destined to create presence.

Letters permit us to gain access to a domestic or intimate sphere, include emotions and perceptions, reflect representations and underlying ideologies, always revealing information about the time in which they were written and about their writers and readers.¹

Alka Mažuranić Nestoroff was the wife of the Bulgarian diplomat Dimitri Minčo Nestoroff who served as First Secretary of the Bulgarian embassy in Belgrade, Istanbul, and Berlin from 1904 until 1914. During Nestoroff’s diplomatic service, Alka regularly sent letters to her family in Croatia where she was describing the various events and impressions of the cities she was living in. These letters formed part of a collection assembled under the title “Diplomatic Memories” and were published for the first time in the first volume

1 “Introduction” in *Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing: Letters as Historical Sources* (Regina Schulte, Xenia von Tippelskirch, eds.). http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/european_univ_inst/HECo4-02.pdf, 6

of the *Istanbul Memories* research project conducted by the Orient Institute in Istanbul. In this paper I will briefly introduce Nestoroffs and the “Diplomatic Memories” letters. To this I add parts of several letters that refer to the everyday Ottoman Istanbul at the turn of the 20th century, seen through the eyes of Alka Nestoroff.

Alka was part of the distinguished Croatian family Mažuranić. Her grandfather Ivan Mažuranić was *ban* of Croatia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and author of *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić*, where he described the death of Turkish notable in Herzegovina. Her sister Ivana Brlić Mažuranić is still considered to be the best Croatian children’s writer, four times nominated for the Noble prize in literature. In addition, their father Vladimir Mažuranić was a distinguished Croatian lawyer and politician, a member and President of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Alka met Minčo Nestoroff in Belgrade in 1905 where he obtained his diplomatic service. They married in 1906 in Zagreb and next year moved to Istanbul. Beside diplomatic service in Istanbul, Minčo Nestoroff was tied to this city through his education at the Robert College. Being of Greek origin and born in Kazanlak in Bulgaria, he played a significant role as the secretary of the Bulgarian tsar Ferdinand, after which he pursued a successful diplomatic career. After the First World War he continued his work in Zagreb until his death in 1943. The couple had two children, Hristo who spent his earliest childhood in Istanbul and Thea who was born during their diplomatic service in Berlin.

As mentioned, above during Nestoroff’s diplomatic service, Alka sent letters to her family. The letters were written in Croatian, with French and German phrases interspersed as was characteristic of the Croatian elite. The letters have been preserved as 70 pages of type-written text. Thirteen letters have survived, of which nine were sent from Istanbul where Nestoroff served from 1907 until 1911; three letters from 1907, five from 1908, and one from 1909. The letters are generally five to seven pages long. They are kept as part of the family heritage in Villa Ružić in Rijeka, Croatia. In addition to letters, the family collection, which today is open to the public, consists of

thousands of books which Ivan Mažuranić and his brothers collected, their personal effects as well as belongings of the other persons who were connected to this family, including Minčo Nestoroff. The collection includes his diploma and transcript from Robert College in Istanbul, various medals as well as documents and photographs from his diplomatic career and service at the Bulgarian court.

In these letters Alka Mažuranić experiences Istanbul from what Edward Said would have termed an Orientalist perspective. Alka, as a member of senior diplomatic circles, approaches the city and its inhabitants from a superior position, reproducing the stereotypes of the era's mainstream European travel literature and printed tour guides. Alka's main concern before entering Istanbul was lack of electricity, phones and poor water supply. For her, Istanbul was amazing and breathtaking, but dirty and backward with strange houses and countless street dogs, which spread disease and were the only real cleaners of the city. Kurds, as cheap manpower, were portrayed as savages and the Turks were not significantly different. Sultan Abdul Hamid II is described as a cruel despot responsible for the Armenian massacres. Alka had a few Armenian acquaintances who survived those massacres and she described their experiences in these letters.

As a wife of a diplomat, she attended the Sultan's Muslim Friday Prayers which she illustrated in detail, portraying the Sultan and his ministers. In addition to this, Alka vividly and extensively described the life of the diplomatic circles in Istanbul, the foreign diplomats and their wives, the ceremonies, and the many formal dinners. She occasionally refers to political topics, but generally is more interested in the everyday life of Istanbul than in the political situation.

However, from the beginning of 1908 she starts to mention the Young Turk movement and comments on Enver, the later Enver Pasha, as a "good looking and elegant young man" whom she met in Belgrade. She does not refer much to the Young Turk revolution, but instead to the counter-revolution and deposition of Abdul Hamid in 1909, which she describes in the greatest detail. The house of the Nestoroff family was situated in Nişantaşı, close to the military academy and overlooking the palace and Bosphorus so Alka directly witnessed the events there.

These only recently published letters are a valuable historical source, which can be mined for insights into numerous fields, including diplomatic, cultural and everyday life, urban or woman's history, just to mention a few. They vividly portray Istanbul and its inhabitants at the beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless, they are not just interesting from this aspect; the fact that they were written from the perspective of a young Croatian woman pertaining to the elite circles makes them an even more unique source. Because of this I add to appendix few selected passages from her letters that can best provide eye-witness account on Istanbul at the turn of the 20th century.²

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² *The Istanbul Letters of Alka Nestoroff* (Klara Volarić, ed.) Bonn: Max Weber Stiftung, 2015, pp. 7-88

APPENDIX

Carigrad, 20 VIII 1907

Still, let me return to the tragi-comical intermezzo, which is so typical of this country where I am going to live. It all happened at that very Carigrad train station, where I took my very first step on Turkish soil. As you know, I packed my three huge suitcases to the brim with clothes and dresses. Following Tinka's advice, I added all my jewelry to one of them – you know, with the biggest yellow one with two levels. In Sofia, I handed over all three suitcases as checked luggage. The guards went with the luggage tickets to pick them up and place them into the carriage which waited for us in front of the station and which was supposed to depart after us. Shortly thereafter, one of these guards returned with two carriers, i.e. Kurds upon whose shoulders my two heavy suitcases rested with incredible ease – as if they were empty or made of aluminum! I never saw such frightful faces like those of these two Kurds! I instantly remembered that they were guilty of the horrible slaughters of Armenians. They did it – one is told – by the decree of the Padishah. And, judging from their faces, it looks like they cannot wait to do it again. Instinctively, I stood before Tereza and my son to protect them, but Tereza was emotionless as always and the little one waved happily to the Kurds!

At that moment I heard terrible noise and quarrel in loud guttural tones with two even more terrifying carriers pulling and carrying away some huge dirty package in an old shabby carpet. They were sweating and cursing and calling on some ragged fellow for help. This ragged fellow, who had a huge wound on his forehead, stood aside serenely, chewing his tobacco and not responding to the commotion and cursing of the Kurds. I will never forget how vehemently Minčo yelled at the carriers in Carigrad's Turkish jargon and was explaining something to the guard and the Kurds with his hands and legs. Nonetheless, they continued to quarrel, although I had no idea why. Even the station officers came, whom the guard was obviously sought, and they all produced an incredible clamor while turning and looking at this package, full of poor dishes, tatters and bags. Suddenly,

one of the officers pointed to the writing on the package. It was the same as the writing on my luggage ticket from Sofia. [What a] scene!

To make things even more mysterious, none of the station officers knew who actually took my suitcase or where it went. Imagine, this suitcase contained my finest dresses and jewelry! Minčo and the officers were running across the station, while I was placing Tereza and the little one in the carriage and witnessing my first disaster on Turkish soil. I have to admit, I was in a fatalistic mood. In my heart I had only one wish: to go to my new place and remove myself, Tereza and the child from this horrible experience caused by the dreadful carriers.

A short time later, full of shock, I again heard terrible noise and maniacal crying. I noticed someone who was even more dreadful than the carriers. I will never be able to forget the appearance of this person ran to the shabby package while yelling, moving hands, putting the Kurds aside and finally sitting on the package, screaming even louder. The scene was so fantastical and incomprehensible. Later I saw officers coming, guards and – my lost luggage. Minčo took out his valet and gave the Kurds a reward. Luckily there was no Sultan's decree for the slaughtering of Europeans. I now noticed for the first time that even Kurds can smile – all completely relaxed and at ease, just like back home.

I have to say that I did not understand anything. Only when we were home did Minčo tell me exactly what had happened. That ragged giant Turk with the dirty *fez* on his head took my suitcase because of a mistake made by a clerk in Sofia. When he noticed the mix-up at the train station in Carigrad he alarmed everyone, screaming that he wanted his baggage back even if he needed to go to the Sultan himself, and that the devil could take my baggage because he does not care about it.

So you see, I encountered my first miracle when taking my first step in this land of wonders – and horrors. A poor looking Asian did not want infidel's treasure but instead he sought to recover his poverty. No matter what it looks like, his poverty is his and he did not want to give it away. Minčo has convinced me that I will encounter

all sorts of wonders on Carigrad's streets. One Thousand and One Night indeed!³

Now let me tell you few things about my apartment. This is also special issue. It may not be great, but it is clearly at least as good as living in Carigrad allows for. We live in the house of some Greek man who built it in one of the most beautiful parts of Carigrad, far away from foul-smelling and unappealing Pera. You can see the room organization on the card, but still this description alone does not allow to imagine what the apartment needs in order to be appropriate. As I wrote to you already, we took the rooms without a furnace and the kitchen without an oven; the floors were soft so we had to use 146 meters of parquetry just to cover them. The wash room is without bath and the toilet is – *alla turca!* We have spent a lot on paraffin lamps and candles for the chandelier– but the furnaces, bath, oven etc. can all be easily sold upon our leaving. The furnaces are charming, white on enameled plates and tastefully decorated. The biggest problem is the furniture, because you do not know where to put it. There are practically no walls! It is a sort of a glass house with a beautiful view on the Sultan's palace - and the sea! Across the street, military cadets train under the supervision of German officers. This is very interesting for our little one because he enjoys soldiers, commanders and the dogs that are driven off by a Turk specifically hired for this occasion.⁴

As you see, Šišli is also full of dirty and poor dogs as in the other parts of Carigrad. My small hope that there would be no dogs at Nišantaš already proved futile on our way from the station to the apartment. Hundreds of dogs were laying in the streets and enjoying the sun from from Pera all the way to Šišli. It is not exactly an attractive sight. These mangy dogs who often exhibit wounds inflicted by their co-sufferers neither move for pedestrians nor for carriages or trams. People usually just step over them; coachmen try to drive around them, while officials are posted along the tram lines with a

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3 Ibid, 28-31. Toponyms are not translated to English in these letters but are kept in original form. Thus author uses 'Carigrad', Slavic name for Istanbul.

4 Ibid, 31-32.

stick in their hands to shoo away the dogs, but often without success. When one group of dogs goes away, the other instantly reappears!

Still, I can forgive Carigrad for the dogs. But I cannot forgive the slaughtering of sheep in the middle of the streets! Once slaughtered, they are placed on the walls of the shops, like “the women of the scary *Oncle Bleue*”. Every day, my little one walks *par la Promenade des Ambassadeurs* to the sea with Tereza, without the stroller, just on her strong hands. Strolling along the promenade in a baby stroller would be cruel given the state of road. The two of them, clean and tidy as they are, are the only white spots in all of Nišantaš and Šišli. Muslim ladies in their dark veils and resembling dark ghosts stick out in an eerier way among all the dogs and turbans on the streets.⁵

Carigrad, [no day or month] 1907

Believe it or not, but I had an amazing experience in my own apartment. It happened so suddenly that Anuška, our Hungarian cook, almost fainted. As for me, I could barely keep the dignity of a diplomat’s wife when I personally managed to accompany a leper through the stairs to the way out.

Believe me, the view on this miserable one was more dreadful than you can imagine anywhere in Europe. I had previously met them on the bridge in Stamboul in passing and gave them charity while taking all possible precautions, that is, without closer contact with them. But now there was a man standing in my home who was approaching me on disfigured legs and whose face no longer resembled a human face. He offered me his leprous hand, whispering words in a low voice, which I could not understand – God knows what language that was! I have no idea how I managed to find the strength to put into his arms some alms and to accompany him down the eighteen stairs on the way out! My legs were shaking as I entered the bath in order to protect the household and myself from this terrible disease. (...) ⁶

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⁵ Ibid, 32.

⁶ Ibid, 33.

Luckily our Armenian doctor Hekimian, a fine gentleman, convinced Minčo that his wife will not become leprous because leprosy is not as contagious as people think it is. There are colonies of lepers in Stamboul who eat food scraps together with the dogs, which the people of Carigrad throw out their windows onto the street. I saw with my own eyes a leper who fought over a dirty slice of bread with a dog! These scenes are especially frequent at the big Stamboul Bridge. Aside from Galata, this is a central gathering place for all kind of beggars.

Galata is indeed so dirty, suffocating and foul-smelling that there is no force in the world that could make me go there again. It is the Jewish – Greek – Turkish part of the city. There are lots of shops with specialties, but God forbid that your survival depends on what they offer you to eat! Jews are living like in a ghetto. Three families live in one smelly room divided by dirty rags. Here, you cook, eat, sleep, kiss, hate and die. God save us!

It is all One Thousand and One Night, although this does not exactly resemble the most beautiful stories that Scheherazade had told. I would also add that at the Grand Bazaar where you buy fruits, vegetables, poultry, fish and eggs, and sometimes even clothes, shoes, *fezzes* and all this jumble, you wonder how we and they stay alive given this horrific insanitary lack of hygiene. Besides, cholera actually never ends in Carigrad. Last month, on the upper floor of our building, a man was allegedly taken to hospital with all the symptoms of Asian cholera. When we mentioned it to others in our circle, no-one was surprised or upset.

Let it be consolation for you at home that we foreigners have the possibility to avoid the Grand Bazaar. We are able to supply ourselves with much healthier food products from a more hygienic facility. We do not drink water at all, only tea, tisane or lemon water. We have a watter supply line, but it has everything but clean water! There are days when we distil it even for the kitchen.⁷

I still have not gotten used to the never-ending fires in Carigrad. The way they announce them is just terrible. In the middle of the

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⁷ Ibid, 34-35.

night you are woken by the stereotypical howling of the dogs and the similar howling from the night guards, who announce the fire in the respective neighborhood. The dogs then just go mad! We keep one ear to the ground to assure ourselves that fire is far from us. As soon as we hear “jangonvar Galata seraj [There is a fire in Galata *seraj*]” or some other part, we turn around in our bed, close our ears and try to sleep. We keep rocks, which is our war ammunition, by our windows. If the barking does not stop after the night guards leave, then Minčo and I nastily throw stones at the dogs. They become still for a second, but then their concert starts again before you even manage to return to your bed. Usually our war finishes at dawn, when the dogs calm down.⁸

Carigrad, March 1908

I always intend to describe to you impressions from my lonely walks through Carigrad. I am not the bravest person, so when I go out by myself, I keep to the more civilized parts of the city. Except for the stereotypical dirty, poor and wooden houses in the suburbs of the city, everything is just as it has been described by hundreds and hundreds of travellers and tourists. I have nothing further to add or describe, this is not appealing, but it's the Orient! It seems like everything fell asleep in this town – there is little construction and what has been built is so tasteless that it spoils the uniqueness of the Orient. Usually the Greeks are the ones doing the building. The Turks, however, do not value their luxurious, mostly wooden-made castles, so the facade is often neglected and ruined. Gardens are all walled-up, making it hard to take a look inside. The most troubling flaw of the city is its lack of electric illumination, an electric tram, and in all, lack of any modern comfort.

It is terrible when one must deal with these paraffin lamps. It's as if they have a devil inside them. You clean, you sweat, you cut and are nice to this miserable circle-shaped burner. But just when you think you have done everything perfectly, there comes the stereotypical syringe, in which smoke and nasty soot are spewed out and the

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⁸ Ibid, 37.

cylinder goes to hell. The most horrible moments are when guests are arriving and your lamp simply will not work. It blows out smoke, dirties the furniture, blackens hands and nostrils, and it smells of everything but perfume. (...) You can experience such adventures with paraffin lamps in all homes, whether the modest ones or the house of grand vizier, unless they have replaced the lamps with candles. God only knows how many thousands of candles burn in Yildiz Palace.

It is also hard not having a telephone because distances are great. After the death of Abdul-Hamid, Carigrad will lose its current design. The dogs will vanish and skyscrapers will show off their hollow Americanized domes. Thank God that this will not happen here so soon. Although no one knows for sure, we all feel that these poor dogs will meet their end. There are more dogs in Carigrad than *fezzes*. Just imagine how hard it is for me to even contemplate it, especially the visible modernization of the town. But, it cannot be avoided – *punctum pausa*. It's inevitable, just as it is inevitable that Minčo and I will get old and our Hristo will have to shave his moustaches and beard.⁹

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9 Ibid, 56-57.

